

Book Review: Violence and Understanding in Gaza: The British Broadsheets' Coverage of the War by Dávid Kaposi

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*Instead of asking who is innocent and who should be blamed, the media should start to treat the Israel-Palestine conflict as a story of mutually painful but very real human relations, argues **Dávid Kaposi** in his new book. **Catherine Hezser** hopes that journalists will take up Kaposi's suggestions and initiate a more complex, balanced, and historically-informed discourse on Israel and Hamas/Palestinians.*

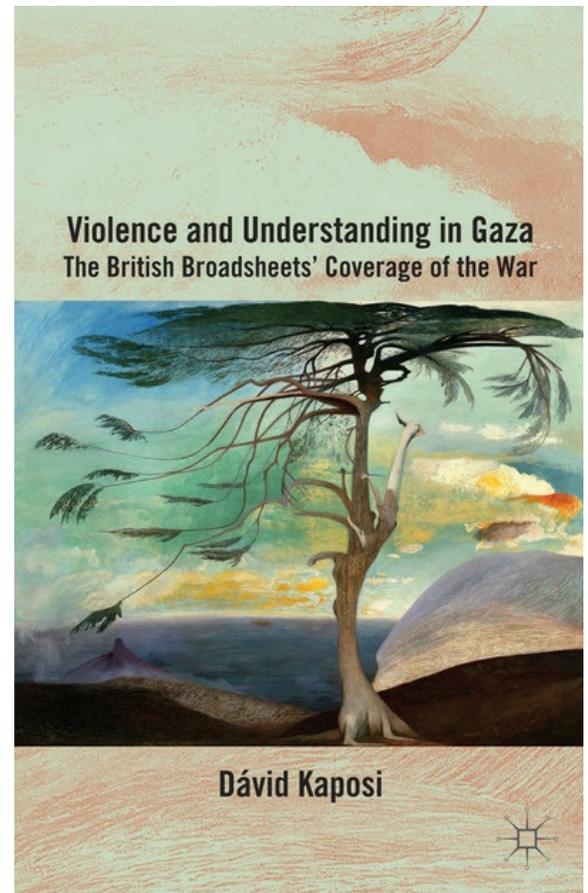
Violence and Understanding in Gaza: The British Broadsheets' Coverage of the War. Dávid Kaposi. Palgrave Macmillan. 2014.

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This study reveals British newspapers' failure to represent the 2008-9 Gaza war in a critically reflected and intellectually stimulating way. [Dávid Kaposi](#) argues that the newspapers sacralized the conflict and created rigid dichotomies of innocence and blame. This simplistic and reductive presentation prevents any deeper understanding of the issues and dialogue between different ideological positions. He calls for a different type of public discourse which moves from a black and white picture to the acknowledgment of different shades of grey.

The re-launch of the military conflict between Hamas and Israel last summer has, again, indicated the impact of British broadsheets on public discourse on the Middle East in Britain. Therefore it is all the more important for newspapers to use their role to educate the public and to initiate dialogical understanding rather than to merely reproduce the seemingly unsurmountable divisions between the different sides. As a psychotherapist who teaches psychology at the University of East London, Kaposi suggests that the violence of the conflict itself may have caused the newspapers' divisive reactions and the desire to allocate blame. He confronts this approach with Hannah Arendt's presentation of Adolf Eichmann as a human being rather than a monster, an approach which allows for the problematization of historical events and the examination of responsibility and agency. The newspapers' tendency to view the war as a fight between Good and Evil excludes "the possibility of pursuing the political solution that *all* newspapers advocate: a two-state solution based on negotiation and compromise" (p.175).

The book starts with a summary of the historical and political context of the 2008-9 Gaza war. The following seven chapters move from a quantitative analysis of the newspapers' coverage of the war to a qualitative analysis of the ways in which the conflict is represented in the texts. The author distinguishes between the "conservative" broadsheets (The Times, The Daily Telegraph) and the "left-liberal" newspapers (The Guardian, The Independent, The Financial Times) which are compared both individually and as groups. He notes that newspaper articles are not as carefully researched as academic studies and usually written alongside the unfolding events rather than from a later reflective perspective. Therefore the "coverage will always already be expected to contain inaccuracies and ... inaccuracies will always already be expected to be the expression of systematic and motivated bias..." (p.16). He does not distinguish between the particular newspapers' distinctive forms of journalism, coverage of world politics,



and readerships, however, and different authors' positions are not taken into account.



Members of the Palestinian media film and photograph a demolition in Nablus in the West Bank. Credit: [michael loadenthal](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The quantitative analysis reveals that the coverage of the Gaza war was much more extensive in The Guardian than in any other British newspaper. Yet most of the material appeared in news articles rather than in editorials, just as in the conservative newspapers. The Financial Times devoted much more importance to editorial coverage of the conflict and The Independent featured most comments. Generally speaking, the British broadsheets were more interested in news and eyewitness accounts than in providing historical context and analysis. Contentwise, Palestinian fatalities were covered much more frequently than Israeli fatalities (by a ratio of 5.5 to 1). Kaposi also noticed the “morally dubious fallacy of conflating various categories of fatalities” (p.40) rather than distinguishing between civilians and militants. Yet “the Palestinian civilian might be said to symbolize the war and feature with singular prominence when it comes to its evaluation” (p.40). The Guardian’s relative neglect of Israeli civilians suggests that the nationality of the fatalities constituted the most important criterion for its coverage. For The Times and The Independent, on the other hand, the humanitarian status of the victim was of major concern.

How do the newspapers engage with history, criticism, and antisemitism in connection with the Gaza war? Do they provide the necessary context to enable readers to understand the events and to develop a critical perspective? Unfortunately, their general focus on the here and now guides their representation of the conflict. They emphasize the “bloodiness” of an ongoing “cycle of violence” rather than mentioning past events (e.g., Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005) that could place the war in a historical perspective. Yet “no real understanding of the war is possible without the historical details” (p.60). No clear-cut differences between conservative and left-liberal newspapers are evident and inconsistencies occur: although the Times mentioned the Holocaust most, conservative newspapers tend to “underreport historical aspects” (p.65); while the Guardian seems to be most critical of Israel, it cannot be accused of an anti-Israel bias. The impossibility to ascribe particular tendencies to any one newspaper or conservative versus left-liberal newspapers continues in the following chapters which investigate their neutral, supportive, or critical attitudes toward Israel and Hamas/Palestinians. What is clear to the author, though, is their need to blame one or the other party: “As far as criticism explicitly was concerned, someone almost always had to be plainly, simply, unequivocally right/wrong. Dialogue in such circumstances is obviously a non-possibility” (p.87). Therefore “the battle becomes a sporting contest between entrenched ideological positions and beliefs” (p.104). What is needed, however, is “a broader conception of the political-moral-legal meaning of human action where it is not exclusively located in pure will or in pure consequence” (p.168).

The author believes that the British broadsheets' discourse on Gaza is conducted in a framework informed by memories of the Second World War, "an event of metaphysical proportions" (p. 177). Memories of this "last epic, and essentially uncontroversial war" may have led news-authors to also view the Gaza war as a metaphysical conflict between Good and Evil and to create a "reductive and subjectivist conception of responsibility" (ibid.). What Kaposi does not mention is Britain's colonialist past and its role in Mandate-period Palestine. It seems that memories of Britain's active engagement in the Middle East before and during the Second World War and retrospective guilt feelings over its colonialist past have always had a greater impact on British public discourse on Israel/Palestine than the Nazi period and the Holocaust. Furthermore, the conflict is sometimes perceived as a Passion play with the Palestinians as the crucified Christ.

The book provides a complex and multi-faceted assessment of British news coverage of the Gaza conflict which will hopefully be expanded to other political developments and newspapers in the future. It is eye-opening in its critical scrutiny. Hopefully, journalists will take up its suggestions and initiate a more complex, balanced, and historically-informed discourse on Israel and Hamas/Palestinians.

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